Nature in the work of Misha de Ridder by Maria Barnas for De Volkskrant Oct. 25, 2005



Misha de Ridder's photographs are of nature. This is not nature as something beautiful, but as something of which the viewer is a part. Nature rarely manifests itself as it does in his photographs.

In Argentina, as the seventh son of the family, you are likely to become a werewolf. At the beginning of the 20th century, this idea was so widespread that seventh sons usually disappeared, were given out for adoption or were killed in horrific ways. In order to stop this, in 1920, a law was passed, determining that every seventh son would be under the personal guardianship of the President. The seventh son received a gold medallion on the day he was christened and a scholarship to study until he was 21. This law is still in effect, and during election campaigns, it still happens that the President is seen attending the christening of a seventh son.

Werewolves are not just found in Argentina. There are all sorts of varieties. They are often sighted in northern Europe. In India, people fear the weretiger, and in China and Japan, you come across the werefox. This universal monster is an example of a very old image, buried deep in the memory of man. Cultures that could not possibly have come in contact with one another share the myth of the werewolf. Individuals seem to go through life with the same images in their thoughts.

This phenomenon of a universal, collective memory, with archetypes as its cornerstones, is an important factor in the work of Misha de Ridder. His work concerns a collective imagining of nature, made up of our fear of nature, and also our longing to see it afresh and to have real contact with it.

De Ridder approaches nature in unconventional fashion. In his words, 'I don't treat nature as something beautiful. My work is more about being in that nature, being part of nature. This is clear in the perspectives I choose, which are not what you are used to - for example, that you are crawling around beneath the bushes, like an animal, or that you are just looking down in a field of grain and there is no horizon.' The artist shows a luxuriant tree the way you would like such a tree to look, as we see it in Los Feliz. The colours veritably drip from the branches, which in turn look as though they were photographed at an angle, from below, as if De Ridder had heard someone call his name, had glanced around behind him and in that fleeting moment encountered this slice of paradise. Yet there is something that keeps the viewer out. Perhaps it is in the details, or maybe it is the sharpness of what you are seeing, over and above all imagining. In that clarity and their urge to represent a reality, these representations of nature approach the grotesque. Ever since landscapes and natural vistas have been depicted in paintings, photographs and films, the viewer has been able to have the experience, to feel that he can not only be at the site, but can also find himself in the world of the artist - in the skies of Van Ruysdael, on the beaches with Rineke Dijkstra's young girls. The way in which De Ridder brings nature into view has this same kind of power, this same ability to override direct experience.

From the time I first saw his book, Wilderness, I see De Ridder's trees in the sand dunes at Schoorl, I see De Ridder when I drive along the highway and catch a glimpse of shrubbery. But there is something more. De Ridder's images demand a space of their own, between association and reality. They evoke your associations with paintings and photographs, but as they do so, they confront you with reality.

It is no coincidence that De Ridder prefers to take his photographs in the far west - the Hollywood hinterlands and the land of pioneers. He goes there with his camera and with an inkling of an image in mind. 'I use the landscape like a canvas, and this area is especially suitable, because all kinds of landscape - canyons, alpine slopes, deserts, virgin forest and coastline - can all be found in a relatively small area. The canyons of southwestern Utah are in this sense perhaps the most extreme. In the course of a day, it is possible to change climate, as though you were laying out different colours on your palette. It can be midsummer on the canyon floor, while high above your head, spring has yet to appear.'
He has the ways of a set-designer, with nature as his warehouse. This

He has the ways of a set-designer, with nature as his warehouse. This intentional approach is interesting in terms of the romantic content in his visual language. The romantic artist lets himself be inspired by the primal power of nature. De Ridder, in contrast, already has an image in mind before he begins, probably nourished by romantic art and American movies. With supreme control, he seeks for however long it takes, until he finds that image, in the form of reality.

These images would be pleasing if they did not compete with nature itself. They offer a world that comes across as familiar, but at the same time, it is too wild, too exotic, too extravagant for us to imagine that it could possibly have anything to do with our life, our own world. The only thing we can offer in return is to look, and to see: a shocking bush, a baffling branch, a mountain of sticks and grass with a hollow-gut loneliness.

Reading something like loneliness into nature is not what De Ridder does. He leaves that to the viewer. The images themselves do not decide whether they portray an inner or an outer world. This duplicatious emptiness is also found in the manner in which De Ridder puts nature into his image. On the one hand, he lets nature be seen as it is, without intervening and without subsequent manipulation or editing. On the other hand, the beauty of this work - beauty to excess - is anything but random, so that you are confronted with an extravagance that is decidedly not commonplace. De Ridder perhaps shows nature as it is, but he does so in an exceptional framework. Nature seldom reveals itself as it does in De Ridder's photographs.

Lost Cabin is a photograph of an expanse of pale, gaunt trees that seem to have sunk into the waves of their own branches. It is as though some digression on the part of a potent presence had determined how they grew - soft moss covering the roots and a distance behind the trees that can only be guessed at. You can get lost in this image, just as you can get lost in the woods where the photographer was standing. It is no Brothers Grimm fairy tale forest - the trees are too narrow. It makes the emptiness and the possibility of getting lost there all the more poignant, more frightening, for it is closer to us and more easily imagined than a forest with dark branches.

A werewolf would have a hard time hiding in these woods. But if that creature is the embodiment of the ambiguity in our relationship to nature - our fear of emptiness and the danger it carries, and our simultaneous desire to be part of its lush reality - then he is present in the work of Misha de Ridder.